

## OBITUARY

LAURAMAY TINSLEY DEMPSTER  
(1905–1997)

Lauramay Tinsley Dempster, who died at home in Orinda, California, on November 14, 1997, started her botanical career at the University of California, Berkeley as a freshman when she was sixteen and finished this career at the same institution almost eighty years later! Her active life—a balancing of personal and professional—is indeed a salutary reflection of distinguished women in science during the twentieth century.

Born on May 11, 1905, in El Paso, Texas, daughter of creative parents (her mother a writer, her father a telescope builder), she grew up in the San Francisco Bay area, with an early interest in natural history. Encouraged by her mother and grandmother, she became a botany student at Berkeley in 1921 and soon was active both in and out of class, joining enthusiastic fellow students to create the University's first field botany club, *Calypso*. The club would draw faculty and pupils together for memorable junkets into the natural bounty of California for almost two decades, an antidote for what William Morton Wheeler once called "the dry rot of biology."

Lauramay's undergraduate course in "phaenogamic botany" from Professor Willis Jepson about 1923 launched an academic relationship which would flourish on and off for more than two decades. Upon graduation in 1925, she was urged by Jepson, who was working on the mustard family for his monumental *Flora*, to consider doing a master's with him, focusing on *Lepidium* for a thesis, undoubtedly not the most exciting genus in the botanical world. But the challenge resulted in a superb, comprehensive monograph, which contained many meticulous line drawings (photographed for the thesis by her father) and was a portent for this budding botanical artist. Said Jepson, when Lauramay completed her master's work, "If it were up to me, I would give you a doctor's degree." Lauramay's lifetime regret was that she didn't published that thesis—"a terrible mistake"; but Jepson's regret would be rectified by Lauramay's eventual professional accomplishments.

Meanwhile, while a university senior Lauramay had met and fallen in love with her future husband, Everett Ross Dempster, an engineering student and native of San Francisco, two years her elder. The Dempster clan had a retreat at Inverness, and the Dempster family young people shared Lauramay's love for the out-of-doors. Indeed, part of the summer before she started her graduate work had been spent on an extended Dempster hiking hagiaria in the southern Sierra.

Miss Tinsley received her master of arts degree early in 1927 and then served as a research assistant for the rest of the academic year. Everett would not complete his engineering program until 1928, but already the couple was looking forward to a wedding in the autumn of 1927. Lauramay decided to explore the science teaching profession in the interim. During the summer of 1927 she taught biology at a Fresno State College field session at Huntington Lake (a job which had been turned down by Herbert Mason). She was the youngest teacher there, expressed some concerns about her abilities, but at least revised in the botany of the mountain area, adding to her personal

herbarium and wondering if she could do some collecting for Professor Jepson.

On October 8, 1927, Lauramay Tinsley and Everett Dempster were married at Berkeley's First Unitarian Church; and Lauramay, who had always had a distinct disgust for housework, began the combination of being a housewife and working in biology, continuing to assist Jepson with his research as well as creating a new household. By early May of 1928, she was perceptibly ready to conclude, in a note to Dr. Jepson: "How could a married lady be a botanist even if so inclined?"

The ensuing academic-year (1928–1929), as Everett pursued an engineering job with Magnavox in Oakland, Lauramay tackled teaching again, this time a beginning botany course for seven young people at Cora Williams Institute on College Avenue in Berkeley. She flunked six of the seven students both semesters, incurring the wrath of administrators and parents alike. But she was later vindicated, since the six who flunked went on to the University of California, where they also flunked. Lauramay's ultimate reaction to pedigogy after these teaching experiences: "teacherly ambitions do not in any way harmonize with my plan of life."

Everett's electrical engineering position with Magnavox Company now took the young couple to Chicago in late May of 1929, where they were "installed" in a tiny apartment in the heart of a big city. Lauramay complained to Jepson that "There is very little here to tease the eye of a botanist, though the new weeds in vacant lots might prove interesting." She thought of visiting the University of Chicago and Northwestern University Botany Departments in the event that there might be some botanical occupation, and Jepson suggested she go to the Department of Botany at the Field Museum, where Jepson's casual acquaintance Paul Stanley was curator. Alas, although she enjoyed the Field Museum exhibits, she was bluntly told that "there was no room for me. . ."

The only appealing Middle West experience came during a vacation trip with Everett by second-hand canoe northward in Wisconsin and into Lake Michigan, where the canoe eventually swamped and the couple had to return to Chicago by train. Also, Lauramay visited New York and New Jersey, finding the countryside in the latter state superior in every way to Illinois. But, as she reflected, "I am more than ever impressed with the uniqueness of California, geographically and climatologically. Compared with it, all the rest of the country that I have seen is nearly monotonously alike. Simultaneously, my longing for California increases. . . . Hoping to come back some day."

Everett's engineering job would shift him from Chicago to Fort Wayne, Indiana, back to Chicago, and to England for a time. But eventually he and Lauramay did return to Berkeley, in 1933, where, of all unexpected things, Everett gave up his engineering profession and decided to become a biologist like his wife. He began taking the necessary background courses and started his pursuit of a Ph.D. in genetics, meanwhile commencing his own teaching career as a botanical assistant in 1935. Dempster received his Ph.D. in 1941 and in his botanical career would go on to become chairman of the Department of Genetics at Berkeley for many years.

Thus it was that Lauramay Tinsley Dempster again became a research assistant to Professor Willis Lynn Jepson in 1933. To be specific, she was his "botanical dissector and preparateur of details for drawings," working part-time for him on the *Flora* and to a greater extent as somewhat of a personal secretary, especially when Jepson was off campus, handling his correspondence, reading proof, toiling over the index of *Madroño*, visiting the library and herbarium, coping with students, visitors, and other assistants. Incidentally, Jepson was continually piqued beyond measure that he, supposedly unlike his academic colleagues, never had a full-time secretary. Unfortunately, this working arrangement which was beneficial to both Jepson and Lauramay came to an end by early 1936 as Lauramay anticipated the birth of her second child (she had lost her first several years earlier).

Although over ensuing years, until World War II, Lauramay did keep in contact with Jepson, and indeed casually did little jobs for him such as proof reading sections of the *Flora* as they appeared, she increasingly devoted her life to Everett and their growing family. As she wrote Dr. Jepson in 1939, "My botany is at present petty and quite avocational . . . but has not been dropped altogether."

While Everett Dempster was advancing at the University of California from instructor in 1941 to assistant professor of genetics in 1944, Lauramay again commenced helping Jepson with his *Flora*, "far from an expert typist but improving," spending about an hour every evening, typing and proof-reading. As she informed him, "Welcome though the money is [from Jepson's university grant], I have enjoyed feeling that I was helping you in a way that relatively few people would be able to do. Indeed it is a pleasure to know that I have contributed, however slightly to so great a work." A friend noted at this time that although Lauramay did "have her hands full" with her family, she "wouldn't do anything for anybody else but for Jepson, she'd give him whatever time she could manage." Everett, incidentally, had not been too happy about his wife working for Jepson, even part-time, because her "job at home is more than man-sized already."

Willis Lynn Jepson died in 1946, his great *Flora* uncompleted; but provisions of his will provided for continuing pursuit of the project. And on October 8, 1951, Lauramay was employed by the University of California as Herbarium Botanist, part-time, fittingly on the Jepson Endowment Fund, a position which she would occupy until the summer of 1963. With the establishment of the Jepson Herbarium in 1951, she became the assistant of the first curator, Dr. Rimo Bacigalupi, and was initially charged with organizing Jepson's botanical books into the herbarium library. Later, between 1959 and 1967, she also received an appointment as Research Geneticist at 60% of full time.

During these years, Lauramay and Everett's own family was growing up, but an "extended family" and befriended friends (Everett was always known for putting students "first"), initially at the house in Berkeley and then in the new oak-woodland suburban home at Orinda and the Inverness retreat, made continuing demands on the Dempsters. Their residence, as a friend once commented, was "like Grand Central Station!"

Nevertheless, despite familial distractions, Lauramay was increasingly able to pursue what through the years she had longed to pursue, the professional life of a taxonomic botanist. She had been continuing her work on revision of Umbelliferae, and, thinking "there is great danger in devoting all of one's attentions to a single group," was also pursuing Hydrophyllaceae, had worked on

Scrophulariaceae, Solanaceae, and *Gilia*. In 1958 she published her first major paper, "Dimorphism in the fruits of *Plectritis* [a genus in the Verbenaceae family] and its taxonomic implications", in *Brittonia*. It was Dr. Bacigalupi who first suggested that Lauramay tackle the revision of that difficult Rubiaceae genus *Galium*, and she would eventually become world famous for this research.

Shortly before Jepson died, Lauramay had written him that "All my life I have craved land, as many people do the seas. In fact there is no type of land that I do not love, and the plants upon it are only its most charming manifestations." Starting in the 1950's, alone or with other companions, she was to see lands—and their natural history—that encompassed the Biosphere. It was across Africa, Europe from France to Sweden, the Alaskan highway through Canada to Fairbanks and Mt. McKinley, the diversity of Australia from the tropics of Darwin to the Red Center at Alice, the alpine tundra of the Snowy Mountains and the coastal rainforests of Queensland; New Zealand, Malayasia . . . and of course North, Central, and South America. In 1988 the continent of Antarctica was added to Lauramay's geographical roster.

At home in California her botanical research and writing accelerated. From 1959–1964, with National Science Foundation grants and especially in close association with Ledyard Stebbins, she was almost continually in the field spring-summer-and-fall the length of the Golden State and elsewhere, working on *Galium*. Publications began appearing, in *Madroño*, *University of California Publications in Botany*, *Allertonia*, *Phytologia*, *Boletín de la Sociedad Botánica de México*, *Great Basin Naturalist*, *Fieldiana*, *Brittonia*, *Leaflets of Western Botany*, *Sida*. Her biographical sketch appeared in the 1965 edition of *American Men of Science*. In 1968 Lauramay Dempster was designated as a Research Associate with the Jepson Herbarium and Library, an appointment which she would hold until her death. Commented Robert Ornduff with respect to this unpaid appointment: "Mrs. Dempster holds an M.A. degree from this institution but does not have Ph.D. Nevertheless, I believe that the quality and volume of her research work are equivalent to that of a person holding a doctorate, and exceed that of a number of doctoral products of our department." Ornduff added that much of her research was carried out without financial support. When the new Jepson *Manual* appeared in 1993, Lauramay was author for not only Rubiaceae, but also Apocynaceae, Caprifoliaceae, most of Valerianaceae and Convolvulaceae, not to mention the genus *Lewisia*. Her definitive treatment of *Galium* for the *Flora of North America* was completed in 1996, seventy years after she was doing research on *Lepidium* for her master's thesis.

The shy young co-ed in the photograph of a Calypso Club excursion in the mid-1920's, Lauramay Tinsley then, would over the decades become more than a distinguished taxonomic botanist. For one who detested housework, Lauramay learned to put on a memorable Thanksgiving spread for 30 people. But on the other hand, when Dr. Jepson came to her parents' home for dinner, Lauramay spilled a platter of bisquits on his head. Her tenacity at driving her car from Orinda through the tunnel to the University when over ninety years old was probably a latter-day manifestation of her youthful love for motorcycles. Yet despite spending much leisure time along the northern California coast, she was not partial to boats. No wonder that when she went overboard while floating the Colorado River through the Grand Canyon, her husband had to pull her back aboard by the hair. Although quiet spoken and self-contained, she was chairman of the Society of Amer-

ican Geographers for three years, an active member of University Women's Club, California Botanical Society, American Society of Plant Taxonomists, and the Amphion Club . . . not to mention a founding member of the Calypso Club.

Lauramay was accomplished at playing the recorder and was remembered for her duets on the oboe with a dog. Her plant anatomy drawings were detailed and exquisite; in the Orinda home her colorful wall-sized murals of tropical rainforest and of flowers were overwhelming. Although many an hour and day were spent indoors over a typewriter, a manuscript, a dried plant specimen, Lauramay was an outdoorswoman, a world traveler, a committed conservationist of the natural world. Although she refused to snoop around another botany professor's office for Jepson, on the other hand Jepson rarely offered her

credit in publication for her research contributions. But she forgave him. "He was always ready to give me attention if I asked for it, but for the most part he left me alone. Left me to use my own judgement. And I think he couldn't have done better!"

When Lauramay Dempster died this past November, her surviving contemporaries were few. Many who had received a coveted Ph.D. diploma during those bygone days, and were entitled to spend a lifetime at research and/or teaching in the hallowed Halls of Ivy, are now both gone and forgotten. Miss Tinsley need no longer regret that she couldn't have been one of them. Dividing her many years between a pursuit of botany and a commitment to family and society, she succeeded in transcending them all.

—RICHARD G. BEIDLEMAN